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**A Trial Run for School Standards That Encourage Deeper Thought**

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Until this year, Ena Baxter, an English teacher at [Hillcrest High School](http://www.hillcrestweb.com/) in Queens, would often have her 10th graders compose papers by summarizing a single piece of reading material.

Last month, for a paper on the influence of media on teenagers, she had them read [a survey](http://www.kff.org/entmedia/mh012010pkg.cfm) on the effects of cellphones and computers on young people’s lives, [a newspaper column](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/28/opinion/28iht-edcohen28.html?ref=rogercohen) on the role of social media in the Tunisian uprising and a 4,200-word magazine article titled “[Is Google Making Us Stupid?](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/)”

A math teacher, José Rios, used to take a day or two on probabilities, drawing bell-shaped curves on the blackboard to illustrate the pattern known as normal distribution. This year, he stretched the lesson by a day and had students work in groups to try to draw the same type of graphic using the heights of the 15 boys in the class.

“Eventually, they figured out they couldn’t because the sample was too small,” Mr. Rios said. “They learned that the size of the sample matters, and I didn’t have to tell them.”

In three years, instruction in most of the country could look a lot like what is going on at Hillcrest, one of 100 schools in New York City experimenting with new curriculum standards known as the [common core](http://www.corestandards.org/).

Forty-two states, the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands have signed on to the new standards, an ambitious set of goals that go beyond reading lists and math formulas to try to raise the bar not only on what students in every grade are expected to learn, but also on how teachers are expected to teach.

The standards, to go into effect in 2014, will replace a hodgepodge of state guidelines that have become the Achilles’ heel of the [No Child Left Behind](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/n/no_child_left_behind_act/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) law. Many states, including New York, lowered standards in a push to meet the law’s requirement that all students reach grade level, as measured by each state, in English and math. [President Obama](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/o/barack_obama/index.html?inline=nyt-per) has expressed a desire to rewrite the law, and many experts predict the common core will be a centerpiece of the effort.

The new standards give specific goals that, by the end of the 12th grade, should prepare students for college work. Book reports will ask students to analyze, not summarize. Presentations will be graded partly on how persuasively students express their ideas. History papers will require reading from multiple sources; the goal is to get students to see how beliefs and biases can influence the way different people describe the same events.

There are a number of challenges.

There are guidelines for what students are expected to do in each grade, but it is still up to districts, schools and teachers to fill in the finer points of the curriculum, like what books to read.

There is no national body responsible for seeing that the standards are carried out, because of fears of giving too much control of education to the federal government. So far, only a few other large cities, including Boston, Cleveland and Philadelphia, have begun to apply the standards in the classroom. And depending on how No Child Left Behind is refashioned, it may still be left to each state to measure its own success.

“The standards create a historic opportunity in that we now have a destination worth aiming for, but only time will tell if they’ll create historic change,” said Chester E. Finn Jr., an assistant secretary of education in the Reagan administration and the president of the [Thomas B. Fordham Institute](http://www.edexcellence.net/), a group that supports national standards.

With 3,200 students, Hillcrest is the second largest school in the city’s pilot. Its size and diversity — whites are a minority (4 percent), Muslims are the religious plurality (about 30 percent) and one-tenth of students are learning English — made it an ideal laboratory to test how the standards might work in the city, officials said.

On a recent Wednesday, Jill Lee, an English teacher, closed a unit on the meaning of the American dream not by assigning a first-person essay, as she once did, but by asking each student to interview an immigrant and write a profile of the person.

Eleni Giannousis made a change in her 10th-grade English class that might make some purists blanch. She had students watch [the filmed stage performance of “Death of a Salesman,”](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0089006/) starring [Dustin Hoffman](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/h/dustin_hoffman/index.html?inline=nyt-per) as Willy Loman, before they read the play. The idea was to have students absorb information through a medium they use for entertainment, one way she was experimenting with her lesson plans to try to meet the new goals.

“It wasn’t about making things easier for the students, but about challenging them to experience a classic in a different way,” Ms. Giannousis said.

While English classes will still include healthy amounts of fiction, the standards say that students should be reading more nonfiction texts as they get older, to prepare them for the kinds of material they will read in college and careers. In the fourth grade, students should be reading about the same amount from “literary” and “informational” texts, according to the standards; in the eighth grade, 45 percent should be literary and 55 percent informational, and by 12th grade, the split should be 30/70.

[Shael Polakow-Suransky](http://schools.nyc.gov/AboutUs/SchoolNews/CitySchools/Issues/032010/QA_Shael_Suransky.htm), the city’s chief academic officer, said the city plans to create an [instructional package](http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/CommonCoreLibrary/default.htm) with exercises that teachers at Hillcrest and other schools have used; student work they have assigned; and guidelines for evaluating the work.

At a training session last month, teams representing several schools in the pilot were asked to list lessons they had learned. Teachers from the [Forward School of Creative Writing](http://schools.nyc.gov/SchoolPortals/11/X287/AboutUs/Overview/Our+Mission.htm), a middle school in the Williamsbridge section of the Bronx, wrote on a piece of cardboard: “Visuals help students make meaning” and “Many students are reading far below grade level.”

[Timothy Shanahan](http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/), a professor of urban education at the [University of Illinois at Chicago](http://www.uic.edu/uic/) who helped write the common core standards for how to incorporate reading into science instruction, said that as a whole, the standards make no adjustments for students who are learning English or for children who might enter kindergarten without having been exposed to books.

“If I’m teaching fifth grade and I have a youngster in my class who reads as a first grader, throwing him a grade-level text is not going to do him any good, no matter what the standards say,” he said.

Mr. Polakow-Suransky, too, cautioned against overly optimistic expectations.

“This isn’t one of those things where you flip the switch and tomorrow, everything is going to be different,” he said.